

# Transformational Leadership Style and Academic Staffs' Commitment to Service Quality at Malaysian Universities

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*This paper discussed the relationship between leadership style of transformational and the state of commitment to service quality among academic staffs in selected six public and private Malaysian Universities. It has been argued that excellent service quality performance is one of the key factors in building niche and having competitive edge that separates one from its competitors nationally and globally. Total useable questionnaires were 387 with a response rate of 36 percent from both private and public universities. The result revealed that there is a significant relationship between transformational leadership style and commitment to service quality among academic staff at the Malaysian universities. This study implies to the policy makers and academic leaders at the universities that they can focus in developing their academic staff, by tapping their potentials, inspiring them, promoting collaboration, motivating and reinforcing positive attitudes towards commitment to service quality. Future study should consider alternative modes of enquires such as employing the longitudinal method of data collection design and a nationwide survey covering samples from the whole population of the higher institutions of learning in Malaysia that would be more significant in making generalizations .*

**Field of Research:** Organizational Management and Service Management

## 1. Introduction

Existing literature on education indicates a motion towards “educational excellence” which is about world class branding, marketable academic programmes, research activities and facilities in attracting and retaining foreign and local students (Isahak, 2007), but how does one compete to be different? Governing bodies, in Malaysia such as the Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA) provide accreditation to quality programmes that fulfil certain standards.

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But how do Malaysian Universities attempt to remain competitive and maintain a sustainable growth in this volatile environment in which programmes have been seen to be globally homogeneous in nature, competitive in terms of pricing, and significant in location and branding? These questions have now begun to receive quite an increasingly amount of attention. Hudson et al. (2004) argue that excellent service quality performance is one of the key factors in building market niche and having the competitive edge that separates one from its competitors. Sim and Idrus (2004), Jusoh et al. (2004), and Sahney et al. (2008) concurred and they uphold the notion that commitment from the academic staff in the education sector to the overall organizational goal such as in the delivery of high service quality is a better strategy in the case of customer retention and satisfaction. They further argued that the employees' strong commitment to good service quality has a strong link to the organizational benefits such as the increase in revenue potentials, low cost effectiveness and also in producing excellent graduates.

Unfortunately, not much attention has been given to the issue of commitment to service quality among the academic staff in the higher education sector. There is an increasing thought that gives support to the idea that students' evaluation of service quality in the Malaysian universities is to a large extent influenced by the way they are treated by the customer contact employee specifically the academic staff (Hasan et al., 2008; Ismail & Abiddin, 2009). Past researches have also suggested that some universities in Malaysia were losing students because their standard of service quality was not up to the expectation of the students (Jain et al., 2004; Firdaus, 2006; Latif et al., 2009). It was reported that the level of service quality in the Malaysian universities was between moderate to slightly above the moderate level (Jusoh et al. 2004; Sim & Idrus, 2004; Hasan et al., 2008, Ismail & Abiddin, 2009). This gives emphasis that there is some concern in the way the students' are being treated or handled. The implication of these students' withdrawals may not only be costly to the students' potential success in their career but also to the universities' reputation, operational and manpower costs (Curry, 2001) and the greatest loss of all will be in terms of potential knowledge workers to the nation.

Studies on commitment to service quality are important and necessary but unfortunately there is still little research progress in this area. Embracing commitment to service quality is mainly to bring about financial growth and an image of sustainability to service organisations. Many questions about what really motivates commitment to service quality among academic staff remains unanswered, particularly in the context of education. Past leadership literatures have associated transformational leaders to organizational commitment, such as to service quality delivery (Jabnoun & Rasasi, 2005); building relationships with customers (Liao & Chuang, 2007); students' engagement with schools (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999) and towards school reforms (Geijsel et al., 2003). Nevertheless, empirical research on transformational leadership and commitment of academic staff to service quality is not extensive and in most of

the past studies, their focus was on management or based on the analysis of the customer level. Individual focus, specifically on the study of academic staff is limited in developing countries, such as Malaysia.

Therefore, the objective of this research was to examine the relationship between relationship between transformational leadership style and the academic staff's commitment to service quality at Malaysian Universities. Based on the findings of this research, it is hope that it would also provide information and further understanding that will assist the leaders and policy makers of the public and private Malaysian Universities as employers to realize the contributions and support of their academic staff in securing profitability and wealth through the commitment of good service quality

## **2. Literature Review**

### *Commitment to Service Quality*

Studies on the commitment to service quality in education literatures follow the same footpath as the general definition of affective commitment. Affective commitment is defined by Meyer and Allen (1991) as “an employee’s emotional attachment to, identification with and involvement in the organization”. Commitment to service quality is defined and understood as “conformity to a specification” (Martin 1986; Witt & Steward, 1996; O’Neil & Palmer, 2004) and in achieving “excellence” (Peters & Waterman, 1982). It is also about commitment to meet the students’ needs and their expectations (Witt & Steward, 1996), and about building relationships between a customer and the organisation (Kandampully, 2002). Accordingly, the most important basis for the assessment of quality is the individual’s experience of a service that comes from the internal quality service of the internal customer (all the organization’s employees). Their commitment and willingness to serve is in the best interest of the customers, which incidentally is a prerequisite for achieving service quality (Kandampully, 2002). Clark et al. (2008) defined commitment to service quality as the “dedication of employees to render service quality and the willingness to go beyond what is expected of them”.

Past findings have also established that employees who are committed to the organization will remain loyal and are inversely related to turnover (Hartline et al., 2000); Clark et al., 2008; Elmadag et al., 2008). In such conditions, employees were known to spend more time and energy in assisting the organization realize its goals and they also put their own self interest aside (Porter et al., 1973; Tsai, 2008; Sohail & Shaikh, 2004; Yiing & Ahmad, 2008). They would subscribe to the idea of being a citizen of the organisation and be fully committed to the goals of the organisation (Rashid et al., 2003).

It has also been reported that the academic staff were known to place emphasis on service quality besides their primary role of teaching and research. Terpstra and Honoree (2009) reported that the academic staff in 1,400 colleges and universities in United States of America were given equal priority for the three activities but the degree of their priority would depend on the size of organization.

O'Neil (2000) in his study in higher education concurred on the importance of internal customer commitment to service quality as a means of gaining competitive advantage. Satisfied external customers, for example the students, were reported to spread by "word of mouth recommendations", which is a powerful tool in marketing (Cuthbert, 1996). Commitment of the highest level would mean emotional attachment to the organisational and this bondage is synonymous to "partnership" with superiors and colleague who would tender the academic staff's intention to continue their tenures at the university (Narimawati, 2007; Rego & eCunha, 2008).

### *Transformational Leadership*

Leaderships can be of many facets and visages and they differ in effectiveness in terms of consequences of their actions towards internal and external stakeholders. Since organizations today are faced with many challenges, especially with the constant changes in technology, economic, social, political and legal conditions and internal processes, flexibility is required in resource utilization and in the promotion of continuous learning (Horner, 1997; Christie, 2002). Therefore, there is a need for leaders in organizations to contribute not only in terms of knowledge or ideas but also in making right the decisions and responding to the changes.

According to Bass and Avolio (1990), transformational leaders will focus on developing their followers by tapping them of their potentials, inspiring them, promoting collaboration, motivating them and by reinforcing positive behaviours. Bass (1990) argues that transformational leaders are pertinent especially during turbulent times when rapid changes and globalization takes place.

Barnett et al. (2001), Antonakis et al., (2003) and Kirkbride (2006) preferred to delineate transformational leadership based on five factors, which is an adoption from Bass and Avolio's (1995, 1997) studies. The five components as suggested by Barnett et al. (2001), Antonakis et al. (2003) and Kirkbride (2006) are: individualized considerations, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, idealized influence (attributes) and idealized influence (behavior). Other authors like Kent et al., (2001), and Nemanich and Keller (2007) preferred to characterize transformational leadership into four factors based on the original studies by Bass (1985a, 1985b). The difference lies in the idealized

influence factor that is being theorized into the dual theory consisting of behaviour and attributes (Barnett, et al., 2001; Antonakis et al., 2003).

It is also interesting to note that in his study, Leithwood (1994) indicated the importance of transformational leadership that indirectly promoted students' achievements through their leaders' abilities to promote the school vision, and provide the much needed intellectual stimulation through the introduction of the best educational practices which fostered a high performance culture. Bess and Golman (2001) who studied leadership in American universities also supported the notion that transformational leaders are not likely to be found at universities where the heavy emphasis is on teaching and decentralization of authority. However, in this turbulent and ever changing environment, transformational leaders are much needed, especially the educational leaders who experience threats of mergers or a total collapse and in need of drastic changes in order to survive. If the leaders from the various universities are ignorant of this saga, they may have "no place in this world" (Bess & Golman, 2001). This statement may be seem too harsh but it illustrates the authors' seriousness in emphasizing the critical roles of leadership in universities that initiate, plan and adapt to global changes. If they are complacent, the vision of building a knowledgeable society will not make any progress and soon the students would find themselves in an "illiterate" zone when it comes to coping with the challenges of globalization. This is also echoed by Barnett et al. (2001) who argued that in an education environment, transformational leadership is crucial to encourage trust, respect and motivate followers towards change, improvements and effectiveness.

Transformational leaders in the education industry were also seen to be responsible for laying the foundation for changes in the organizational culture, strategies and even structures that are similar to any other corporate setting (Yu & Jantzi, 2002). Strategies may include development of employees to attain a higher professional level that will directly increase their capabilities, innovativeness and give more empowerment to their subordinates to shape initiatives that will bring about the much needed changes (Clark et al., 2008). It is also interesting to note that employees in the hospitality industry are known to experience high turnover rates. Therefore, service organization may need to consider changing structurally to be less formal if they wish to retain their employees and build up loyalty.

### **3. Methodology and Research Design**

This study was based on a descriptive correlation research design and cross sectional survey methodology. The target population for this study consisted of academic staff from two public universities and four private universities. Their perception of their immediate superiors such as the deans or heads of department or heads of schools were closely studied to identify their commitment

to service quality. Using a 5-Point Likert-type scale, the respondent indicated their intensity of agreement anchored by 1, “strongly disagree” through to 5, “strongly agree” with items phrased. The survey took approximately three (3) months with a total of 387 responses. For this study, the researcher adapted a later version of MLQ instrument commonly known as MLQ 5x-short-forms to rate transformational leadership. Although the factors that measure transformational leadership styles were distinctive, (5 factors measuring transformational leaders) in this study a single dimensional construct for transformational style was adopted. This is in line with past empirical studies by Walumbwa et al. (2004, 2005) on transformational leadership construct. A recent modified version by Clark et al. (2008) was adapted in this study with slight modifications made in order to complement the study context for measures for commitment to service quality items. For this study a combination of on-line and self administered questionnaires were distributed to collect individual data on the respondents (academic staff). Overall the response rate was 36 percent which was slightly better than what was reported generally in the Malaysian context (Othman et al., 2001).

#### **4. Discussion of Findings**

Tables 1 below summarize the demographic profiles of the respondents. The sample also indicates that female respondents represented a slightly higher percentage of total samples (59%) when compared to the male respondents (41%). The majority of the respondents possessed Master degrees or others of similar level (71%) while 29 percent had completed their doctorate degree. Majority of the respondents were middle age of between 30 to 40 years of age (43%) followed by those between 40 to 50 years old (25%). About 18 percent of the academicians were from the younger group age of between 20-30 years. With reference to their experience in teaching, the sample showed a balance between those who had teaching experience of between 1 to 5 years (33%), 5 to 10 years (28%) followed by 10 to 15 years (17%) and above 20 years (14%). More than 47 percent of the respondents were from business faculty followed by faculty of information technology (12 %).

**Table 1: Summary of Respondents' Profile**

	Variables	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	159	41.08
	Female	228	58.92
Highest Qualification	Doctorate	113	29.20
	Masters and others	274	70.80
Age Group	20 < 30 Years	69	17.83
	30 < 40 Years	168	43.41
	40 < 50 Years	97	25.07
	50 and above	53	13.69
No. of Teaching Years	1 <5	131	33.85
	5 <10	110	28.42
	10 <15	66	17.05
	15 < 20	25	6.46
	Above 20 years	55	14.22
Job Aspects	Teaching	304	78.55
	Research	41	10.59
	Services	42	10.85
Faculty	Business	182	47.03
	Humanities	48	12.40
	Information Technology	45	11.63
	Engineering	22	5.68
	Others	90	23.26

Table 2 below presents the mean and standard deviation of the transformational leadership style and commitment to service quality as indicated by the respondents. Respondents rate their leaders as those who display high “sense of power and confidence” ( $M=3.767$ ,  $SD= 0.918$ ) which has the highest transformational leadership style quality mean followed next by “have my respect” ( $M=3.736$ ,  $SD=0.967$ ). The lowest mean, ranked by the respondents was “spends time teaching and coaching” ( $M=3.145$ ,  $SD= 1.060$ ) followed by the next lowest, “instils pride” for being association with the leader ( $M=3.227$ ,  $SD= 1.110$ ). From the analysis, it indicates that the respondents perceive their leaders as one that has demonstrated some power and confidence which may have gain some respect from the academic staff. However, it seems that the academic staff also perceived that their leaders were not placing much importance in coaching or training them, nor they were proud to be associated with the leaders.

The mean and standard deviations of the commitment to service quality as shown in Table 2, indicated by the respondents were above midpoint of 2.5.

Respondent ranked “feel strongly about high service quality priority” ( $M=4.289$ ,  $SD= 0.682$ ) to be the highest commitment mean and the next highest being “care about the quality services”, of the university ( $M=4.287$ ,  $SD=0.689$ ). The lowest mean ranked by the respondents were “often discuss quality issues with outsiders” ( $M=3.656$ ,  $SD= 0.895$ ) and followed by next lowest as “superior explains the importance of service quality” ( $M=3.783$ ,  $SD= 0.860$ ).

This indicated that the academic staff at Malaysian universities have strong affective commitment towards their organizations where they would not only participate but also give support to ensure that the delivery of service quality will be the university’s top priority. However, the respondents felt that the university leaders were not paying enough attention to the dissemination of service quality and they themselves were very keen to discuss quality issues with others outside their university.



**Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviations of Transformational Leadership Style and Commitment to Service Quality**

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation
<b><i>Transformational Leadership Style</i></b>		
Sense of power and confidence	3.767	0.918
Have my respect	3.736	0.967
Moral & ethical	3.729	0.936
Group's mission	3.726	1.006
Accomplishment	3.713	0.909
A strong sense of purpose	3.703	0.920
Optimistically about the future	3.700	0.957
Confidence achieved goals	3.641	0.956
Values and beliefs	3.625	0.950
Raises critical questions	3.522	0.920
Seeks differing perspectives	3.496	1.056
Compelling vision	3.475	1.016
Problems from different angles	3.457	1.043
Treats as an individual	3.370	1.053
Beyond self interest	3.370	1.058
Different needs / abilities/ aspirations	3.367	1.033
Completing assignments	3.357	1.054
Develop strengths	3.282	1.132
Instils pride	3.227	1.110
Spends time teaching and coaching	3.145	1.060
<b><i>Commitment to Service Quality</i></b>		
Feel strongly about high SQ priority	4.289	0.682
Care about quality services	4.287	0.689
Efforts beyond expected in the delivery of high SQ	4.147	0.680
Feel strongly about improving SQ	4.14	0.684
Personal accomplishment in providing SQ	4.119	0.676
Enjoy discussing quality issues	3.961	0.735
Share similar feelings of high SQ delivery	3.956	0.891
Superior explains the importance of SQ	3.783	0.860
Often discuss quality issues with outsiders	3.656	0.895

*Note: SQ-Service Quality*

### ***Relationship between Leadership styles and academic staff commitment to service quality***

Simple linear regression analysis was performed to examine the relationship between transformational leadership style and academic staff's commitment to service quality. The regression analysis is the most appropriate statistical tool to run as the objective of this study. It is to establish a linear relationship between the two variables that is: to predict values of dependent variable from values of independent variable (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). It was found that there are no serious violations of the assumptions.

The regression analysis results as shown in Table 3, indicates a positive and a significant relationship between the academic staff's commitment to service quality and transformational leadership style of their leaders ( $t=9.334$ ,  $p=0.001$ ). The result indicates that, the higher they rated their leaders, transformational leadership style, the more would be their commitment to service quality. However, the strength of the relationship between the two variables is 0.430 as measured by  $r$ -value at  $p$ -value of 0.001 which is considered as only having a moderate effect which is within  $r=0.30$  to  $0.49$  range (Cohen, 1988,1992). The coefficient of determination measured by  $r$ -square is 0.185. It demonstrated that the effect of transformational leadership style helps to explain more than 18 percent of the variance in the academic staff's score on commitment to service quality.

**Table 3: Regression Analysis Summary: Relationship between the Leadership Styles and Commitment to Service Quality**

Variables	$r$	$r^2$	$\beta$	$t$	Sig
Transf L	0.43	0.185	0.43	9.334	0.001***

\*\*\* $p<0.001$ , \*\* $p<0.01$ , \* $p<0.05$

DV: Commitment to Service Quality, Transf L: Transformational Leadership,

There seems to be no evidence to support the influence of transformational leadership style on commitment to service quality ( Hashim, 2009), but related literatures have inferred that affective commitment does have the same effect on employees as commitment to service quality. It is therefore can be linked to the commitment of the employee in the achievement of the organizational goals such as the provision of the best service quality and meeting customer expectations (Suliman, 2001; Wong et al., 2002; Malhotra & Mukherjee, 2004; Emery & Barker, 2007; Clark et al., 2008).

Related to the above, the result from this study seems to be in agreement with the findings of previous studies that have supported the perspective that transformational leadership has a link to the commitment of the subordinates (Barnett et al., 2001; Erkutlu, 2006; Emery & Barker, 2007; Liao & Chuang,

2007). Clark et al. (2008) have also agreed that empowerment aspects in the leadership styles were similar to the transformational leadership style that would enhance frontline employees' commitment to high service quality. Clearly these findings have highlighted the extraordinary perceived relationship effects of the transformational leaders. Correspondingly, the affiliation effects of transformational leaders from the Malaysian universities would be similar. They too play a dominant role in stressing on the visions, missions and goals as well as having the ability to effectively inspire and engage the academic staff in fostering collaborations towards a firm commitment to service quality. Transformational academic leaders are also known to have the ability to influence the academic staff to transcend out of their own initiatives for the sake of their universities. Thus, they would more likely be willing to comply with the appeals of their leaders to engage in proactive forms of customer service attitudes and behaviour.

Although past literature describes the university structure as being bureaucratic which means that they would follow the directive and authoritative leadership styles (Morshidi, 2006), this study does provide some evidence that the leaders from the universities in Malaysia were moving towards more of transformational state of leadership. It will be to the advantage of the universities if this falls true because effective leaders should be transformational which is needed badly, especially so in these turbulent times (Yulk, 2006).

## **5. Conclusion and Implications**

This research has its theoretical implications on the key area related to addition of new knowledge in integrating two disciplines which are: organizational behaviour and service quality management in education in Malaysia. The significant findings further support Clark et al.'s (2008) study that suggests future studies should to include transformational leadership style that would impinge customer contact personnel attitude to commitment to service quality in different service contexts (Clark et al, 2008). Although there are many leadership styles that education and policy makers at the universities can choose from, this finding suggests that the transformational leadership style would be ideal in an education setting that would influence the academic staff's commitment to service quality. This present study also departs from past studies whereby the focus only on individual analysis level. From the managerial perspective, this study implies to the policy makers and academic leaders at the universities that they can focus in developing their academic staff, by tapping their potentials, inspiring them, promoting collaboration, motivating and reinforcing positive attitudes towards commitment to service quality. This study also has its share of limitation in the sampling frame which only considers a particular group of institutions of higher education (selected universities only) and therefore the results cannot be generalized to the whole education industry. Future studies should also consider alternative modes of enquires such as employing the longitudinal method of data collection design (e.g. experiments,

archival data, observations or interviews) and a nationwide survey covering samples from the whole population of the higher institutions of learning in Malaysia.

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